little-known documents

Thorkelin y el *Beowulf* / Thorkelin and *Beowulf*

JORGE LUIS BORGES

INTRODUCTION AND TRANSLATION BY JOE STADOLNIK

Introduction

JORGE LUIS BORGES (1899–1986) CHOSE AN UNCONVENTIONAL HOBBY TO OCCUPY HIS MIDDLE AGE WHEN HE DEVOTED HIMSELF IN THE 1950S to the study of Anglo-Saxon language and literature. His efforts were made easier by his fluency in English. "Georgie" had grown up speaking English with his father and Staffordshire-born grandmother and reading English books in the family library (Williamson 34).[1] He would later call the time spent in that library "the chief event of [his] life" ("Autobiographical Notes" 42). In the following essay, "Thorkelin y el *Beowulf*" ("Thorkelin and *Beowulf*"), Borges sympathizes with a fellow student of Anglo-Saxon whose own moment of bookish revelation would come to define him: Grímur Jónsson Thorkelin (1752–1829), the first modern editor of *Beowulf*.[2] This unpublished essay recounts Thorkelin's seemingly predestined attraction to the *Beowulf* manuscript and the catastrophic course of his long devotion.[3]

Borges's interest in Anglo-Saxon first surfaced in 1932, in the essay "Noticia de los kenningar" ("A Report on *Kenningar* [kennings]"). Two decades later, the Old English language and its literature had graduated from the occasional object of his critical attention to a more consuming pastime. By 1958 he was convening a Saturday study group with students to work through Henry Sweet's *Anglo-Saxon Reader in Prose and Verse* (Williamson 343). He studied Anglo-Saxon at the University of Texas, Austin, in 1961 while working there as a visiting professor and then at Harvard University, where he lectured in 1967–68, a fact that his fictional persona in "El otro" (1975) mentions to his younger self, whom he meets in a dream (346).[4] He described Old English and Old Norse as "hobbies" in a Harvard lecture in 1967 (*Craft* 9).[5] He later proved an industrious writer on these hobbies, largely in collaboration.

His curriculum vitae, however, fails to capture the deeply personal, almost mystical nature of Borges's obsession with Anglo-Saxon, which he found difficult to express and others found hard to understand. While his sense for poetic craft drew him to Anglo-Saxon meter and metaphor, he was enamored, too, with the experience of studying it. Take his poems "Al iniciar el estudio de gramática anglosajona" ("Embarking on the Study of Anglo-

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Saxon Grammar") and "Composición escrita en un ejemplar de la gesta de *Beowulf*" ("Poem Written in a Copy of the Epic of *Beowulf*").[6] These short pieces romanticize his hobbyist's philology, celebrating a new adventure into a language's past. Borges struggled to explain this romance to one confused reader of "Al iniciar": "I tried to make him understand that Anglo-Saxon was as intimate an experience to me as looking at a sunset or falling in love" ("Autobiographical Notes" 94). In conversation, he once announced that he studied Anglo-Saxon "precisely because [he] recognize[d] [his] immortal nature" in it and wanted to "reap the benefits of metempsychosis," his favored Greek term for reincarnation (Vázquez 218). "Why couldn't my soul have spoken, in a past body before the tenth century, that language that later became English?" he asked. His audience laughed, but Borges did not.

"Thorkelin y el *Beowulf*" sheds new light on Borges's Anglo-Saxonism and the speculations on immortality that his hobby stirred in him. In the essay Borges narrates Thorkelin's ill-starred disinterment of the nearly forgotten *Beowulf* manuscript from the depths of the British Museum, in 1786; the destruction, in 1807, of his first transcription and translation of the manuscript in Copenhagen; and the publication of an unsparing critique of his 1815 edition that devastated him.[7] Borges's essay is written in a spiral notebook in his mother's cursive hand (suggesting that it was composed after 1955, when his eyesight began to deteriorate precipitously).[8] Revisions are more stylistic than substantive; portions are often struck out, then revised and reinserted later in the essay, resulting in fairly polished prose. The text of the essay runs on the recto, while notes and revisions are on the verso.

"Thorkelin y el *Beowulf*" resembles the short reflections on literary topics in Borges's *Otras inquisiciones* ("Other Inquisitions"; 1952), and it shares some small observations on the kaballah and the Quran with one of that book's essays, "Del culto de los libros" ("The Cult of Books"). Elements of the essay's description of early Germanic poetics and of Thorkelin's biography also appear in Borges's coauthored monographs on medieval Germanic literature.[9] "Thorkelin y el *Beowulf*" reduces the list of kennings that appeared in *Antiguas literaturas germánicas* (16–17) to the form it would take in *Literaturas germánicas medievales* (22), and all three works use Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* to illustrate the coexistence of alliteration and rhyme in English poetry of later periods (*Antiguas literaturas* 16; *Literaturas* 21). Borges devotes two nearly identical paragraphs in the monographs to Thorkelin's edition and N. F. S. Grundtvig's response (*Antiguas literaturas* 18–19; *Literaturas* 23–24); the essay contains a slightly expanded sentence (beginning "Encarnada en hombres violentes" ["Embodied in violent men"]) from this repeated passage.

Borges's source for the details of Thorkelin's project was John Earle's introduction to *The Deeds of Beowulf* (1892), a modernized prose version of the epic.[10] Earle relies heavily on Thorkelin's own account of his misfortunes in the 1815 edition of *Beowulf*, which we know now to be unreliable at best.[11] Thorkelin's claim to have lost a complete translation and scholarly apparatus to British naval fire appears to have been a convenient cover story to justify the edition's long delay. Magnús Fjalldal convincingly portrays Thorkelin not as an intrepid if unlucky scholar but as a vain careerist who prioritized his business and social commitments in Copenhagen over his work on the edition of *Beowulf* and who knew from the start (as did his contemporaries) that he was an incompetent editor of Old English.

But Borges believed Thorkelin to be a tragic figure, whose arduous task of editing and understanding the *Beowulf* manuscript was made more arduous by the accidents of the world around him. The essay concludes with an invitation to speculate on Thorkelin's possible afterlives; its closing remarks imagine a feeling of Anglo-Saxonist déjà vu felt by a bookshop browser in Buenos Aires. It is a feeling familiar from Borges's "Composición escrita en un ejemplar de la gesta de *Beowulf*." There, intimate study of an old epic moves its speaker-annotator to meditate on the vastness of the soul and its secret knowledge of its own history. Here, in "Thorkelin y el *Beowulf*," Borges imagines the mere mention of *Beowulf* disquieting this unsuspecting

Argentine reader, whose old jilted soul feels the sudden pang of a past, tragic intimacy with the epic, stumbling upon its name anew.

Notes

I am grateful for the generosity of María Kodama and the Jorge Luis Borges Estate, who kindly granted permission to publish this essay and translation. My thanks go to Anya Adair, Anita Savo, Roberta Frank, Eric Weiskott, Jessica Henderson, Bofang Li, and Cristina Alvarado Fernández for helping this piece along its way.

1. On Borges's life, see also Woodall.

2. I take the essay's title from a list of contents written on the inside back cover of the notebook in which it was written.

3. For a summary of the Borges collection in which the essay appears, see Wall.

4. Borges's stint in Austin provided source material for another short story, "El soborno" ("The Bribe"; 1975), in which an Icelandic Anglo-Saxonist at the University of Texas maneuvers for the departmental support of an American colleague by means of an anonymous article in the (fictional) *Yal* . Borges litters the story with Anglo-Saxonist trivia, inventing his characters' career trajectories and an argument about the style of the Old English poem *The* .

5. Vladimir Brljak's "Borges and the North" is an insightful treatment of the poet's "Northernism" and its complex relation to his poetics and politics. For other recent surveys of Borges's interest in Old English, see Hadis; Toswell.

6. "Al iniciar" appears in his *El* (1960) and "Composición" in *El* (1969).

7. Thorkelin's edition, *De* *I* ("Of Events concerning the Danes in the Third and Fourth Centuries: A Poem in the Anglo-Saxon Dialect"), contained a Latin translation.

8. When Borges's sight failed, his mother, Leonor Acevedo, acted as his amanuensis. Wall dates the notebook to 1955–60 (157–58).

9. Borges wrote *Ant* (*Anc* *c Literatures*) with Delia Ingenieros (1951), *Literaturas germánicas medievales* ("Medieval Germanic Literatures") with María Esther Vázquez (1966), and *Breve antología anglosajona* ("Brief Anglo-Saxon Anthology") with María Kodama (1978).

10. These details include Thorkelin's initial discovery of the manuscript's existence; the tragic destruction of his transcription and notes during the British bombardment of Copenhagen; his initial publication of an edition of *Beowulf*, which contained a Latin translation; the attacks of the young philological phenomenon Grundtvig; and Johan von Bülow's crushing retraction of support.

11. See Fjalldal for the ways in which the story told by Earle and Borges contradicts historical evidence.

Thorkelin y el *Beowulf*

[1r][1] Los amores de los hombres y de los libros invitan a la meditación, y el *Don* *j* no es el único ejemplo. Alejandro de Macedonia no dormía sin haber puesto bajo la almohada su puñal y su *I* ; los griegos bizantinos fabricaron vidas de Cristo con versos y hemistiquios de Homero; los musulmanes juzgan que el Alcorán es uno de los atributos de Dios, anterior al árabe en que fue escrito y a la Creación, y Dorian Grey [sic], según Oscar Wilde, fue envenenado por un libro, como otros por un abanico o por una antorcha. Y qué decir de los cabalistas, que buscaban misterios en la disposición y en el número de las letras de la Escritura? Menos famosos que los casos de pasión literaria que he enumerado, pero quizá no menos patético, es el de Thorkelin, anticuario danés [2r] del siglo XVIII.

Hacia mil setecientos ochenta y tanto halló en un catálogo de manuscritos anglosajones[2] la mención de un poema, cuyo sujeto eran las guerras de los daneses.[a] Este hallazgo transformó su destino. Europa entera, por obra del *Os* de MacPherson, volvía ojos al pasado; Dinamarca releía y glosaba con devoción a Saxo Gramático.[3] Thorkelin, en 1786, fue a Inglaterra y volvió con los tres mil versos

de *Beowulf* transcritos de su puño y letra. Un incendio había mutilado los bordes del texto [3r] original que databa del siglo X.[4] Veinte años de su vida consagró Thorkelin a interpretar su copia escrita a traducirla en prosa latina y a prepararla para la imprenta. Las dificultades que se oponían a su labor eran casi infinitas. Bastemos recordar las muchas lagunas de texto original en irregular ortografía, su arbitraria y escasa puntuación, los nombres propias sin mayúscula, la falta de guiones, la intercalación de espacios en la escritura de una sola palabra o su omisión entre palabras distintas. Hasta las líneas que lo habían llevado a Inglaterra eran, ahora lo sabemos, erróneas; el *Beo Wulf* es la gesta de un príncipe que da muerte a un demonio de los pantanos, descendiente [4r] lineal del primer asesino, Caín, y un manchado dragón que guarda un tesoro. La prosa anglosajona era accesible a los filólogos del siglo XVIII, no así el verso, de vocabulario y de mecánica peculiares.

El verso anglosajón constata [sic] de un número indeterminado de sílabas é ignoraba la rima y aún asonancia. La aliteración era un elemento esencial; en cada verso había, por lo general, tres palabras que empezaban con la misma letra, dos en la primera mitad, una en la segunda.[5] Genzmer sostiene que la aliteración es más orgánica y eficaz que la rima, ya que penetra todo el verso y no solo el fin. El hecho es que en inglés la aliteración aún profunda suele convivir con la rima. Pruébelo la famosa estrofa de Coleridge [5r]

> The fair breeze blew, the white foam flew,
> The furrow followed free;
> We were the first that ever burst
> Into that silent sea.

Muerto el anglosajón y quienes lo hablaron, la música del verso al aliterativo resucito siglos después (como si hubiera quedado en el aire) en el místico *Piers Plowman* de Langland:

> "Is this Jhesus the jester" quoth I "that Jewes
> did to death,
> Or is it Piers the Plowman? Who paynted
> him so rede?"[b]

A las dificultades místicas del poema (que en el manuscrito está registrado [6r] como si fuera prosa, sin división entre verso y verso) se agregaron las de un vocabulario, abundante en esas perífrasis que el Norte llamó kenningar. Así el mar es el camino de las velas, el camino de cisne, la taza de olas, la ruta de la ballena; el sol es la candela del mundo, la alegría del cielo, la piedra preciosa del cielo; el arpa es la madera del júbilo; la espada es el residuo de los martillos, el compañero de pelea, la luz de la batalla; la batalla es el juego de las espadas, la tormenta de hierro; la nave es la surcadora del mar; el dragón es la amenaza del anochecer, el guardián del tesoro; el cuerpo es la habitación de los huesos[6] [7r]; el rey es el señor de los anillos, el áureo amigo de los hombres, el pastor de hombres, el distribuidor de caudales . . . En un remoto y apenas recuperado lenguaje, tales locuciones tenían que ser enigmáticas para un siglo cuyo gusto poético se había formado en las páginas de Voltaire o de Johnson.

Thorkelin creyó que la obra que estaba traduciendo era a su vez la traducción de una obra danesa desconocida; quizá fue indispensable este acto de fe para alimentar su largo entusiasmo. [8r] Conjeturó que el traductor era Alfredo el Grande que había vertido al anglosajón obras de Pablo Orosio, de Boecio, de San Gregorio Magno, y de Beda.[7] También conjeturó que el autor era contemporáneo del protagonista, Beowulf, que no podía ser otro que Bous, aquel hijo de Odin, cuya valerosa muerte y cuyo túmulo ha descrito Saxo Gramático. Esta identificación nos llevaría al siglo IV; las germanistas, ahora, optan por un autor anglosajón y por las décadas iniciales del siglo VIII.

El danés Thorkelin quería que fuera danés el poema cuya resurrección y revelación justificaría su vida; ello tal vez ayude a explicar el hecho inexplicable [9r] de que no ahondara en

el estudio del dialecto sajón y prefiriera adivinarlo a través de las lenguas congéneres. Con laborioso amor fue internándose en el antiguo ámbito del poema, o en lo que él suponía ser ese ámbito. Ya tocaba a la fin la larga labor, ya los originales estaban casi listos para la imprenta, cuando sucedió la catástrofe.

Encarnada en hombres violentos, en hombres más afines a Beowulf que al editor de *Beowulf*, la pasión patriótica que lleva Thorkelin a Inglaterra y le impuso el destino de descifrar un arduo manuscrito, súbitamente se volvió contra él y aniquiló su obra. En 1807 la escuadra inglesa bombardeó a Copenhague. La Universidad fue incendiada, buena [10r] parte de la ciudad fué incendiada, y también la biblioteca de Thorkelin. Apenas sí pudiera salvar la primitiva copia del texto.

Thorkelin, solo, no se hubiera sobrepuesto a la desventura pero [un] amigo generoso Juan Bülow lo animó a reiniciar en la vejez la tarea acometida en la juventud. En 1815 apareció la edición príncipe de *Beowulf* bajo el curioso título de *Hazañas ejecutadas por los daneses en los siglos tercero y cuatro*. El aplauso fue unánime. Thorkelin creyó, al fin, pregustar al sabor de la gloria, pero una tarde llegó a su manos (como antes el catálogo) un periódico titulado *El Álbum de Croquis*. Con una curiosidad que muy pronto fue indignación y luego desventura leyó el primero de una serie de artículos dedicados a su obra. Los firmaba un jóven pastor evangélico, Grundtvig, que había estudiado con fervor y con una clarividencia siniestra el texto publicado por Thorkelin. Grundtvig propuso enmiendas que el examen del original confirmó, descubrió personajes y episodios no sospechados y refutó con irrefutables razones el prólogo, la copia, los índices, la versión latina y las notas. La posteridad ha corroborado ese fallo.[8] [11r] No concede otro valor a la obra de Thorkelin que el de una curiosidad literaria. . . Bülow, para mayor amargura, protegió a Grundtvig.

Tal es la singular historia de Thorkelin y de su malhadada pasión. La muerte corporal le llegó en 1829, pero nada cuesta imaginar una continuación en un plano distinto. Thorkelin, en un cielo cristiano, hablando con el poeta de *Beowulf*; Thorkelin en un cielo platónico, mirando, al fin, el arquetipo eterno de *Beowulf* . . . También es lícito pensar pitagóricamente, que Thorkelin habitó en otros cuerpos y que hoy en una librería de Buenos Aires, vuelve las hojas de este libro casual, ve la desconocida palabra *Beowulf* y siente, apenas, el principio [11v] de una vaga inquietud—[9]

Author's Notes

a. El primer verso del *Beowulf* habla de los "daneses de lanza."[10]

b. Bertha Phillpotts observa que la aliteración corresponde al hábito inglés de acentuar las sílabas iniciales.

Editor's Notes

Text that is crossed or struck out is not translated, as changes are routinely minor. I have regularized the manuscript's inconsistent accents.

1. Brackets in the text mark folio numbers of the notebook. In the left margin of this page is written, in English, "In 1786, G. J. Thorkelin, an Icelander—2 transcripts," apparently a quotation from the bibliography of the *Beowulf* entry in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (vol. 10, pp. 760–61).

2. Text here has been struck out: "que cierta biblioteca de Londres incluía un viejo poema, cuya materia eran las guerras entre dinamarqueses" ("that a certain library in London held an old poem, whose subject was the wars between Danes").

3. "Dinamarca . . . Gramático" ("Denmark . . . Grammaticus") is written on the facing page, folio 1v, its place indicated by corresponding X marks.

4. "Con su copia, Thorkelin volvió a Dinamarca" ("With his copy, Thorkelin returned to Denmark") runs up the left margin. This note is not called out anywhere in the text.

5. "(2)" has been erased in the text here; on the facing page, folio 3v, two notes are numbered "(2)." The first, which has been crossed out, reads, "Se ha observado que la aliteración corresponde a las gentes que acentúa los sílabas iniciales (los ingleses); la rima a la que acentúa las finales (los franceses)" ("It has been observed that alliteration corresponds to peoples who stress initial syllables [the English]; rhyme with those who stress final ones [the

French]"). The "(2)" corresponding to the second note on folio 3v is inserted after a quotation from *Piers Plowman* later in the text. This note, running vertically below the crossed-out note, relates facts apparently drawn from the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* entry for Copenhagen (vol. 7, pp. 98–99): "Portus mercatorum (Saxo) bombardiado en 1807—le quemó la Universidad, la iglesia principal" ("Portus mercatorum bombarded in 1807—burned the University, the main church").

6. Struck out here and on folio 7r is "la reina es la tejedora de paz" ("the queen is the weaver of peace").

7. On folio 6v are notes from the entry for Alfred the Great in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (vol. 1, pp. 583–84): "Ottar—Ohthere enc. Brit. XXI pag. 939 descubrió ["discovered"] the White Sea." Running vertically is "Beda, Orosio, Boetiu y Gregorio," "St. Augustine."

8. This section ("El aplauso . . . ese fallo" ["The applause . . . that verdict"]) is written on the facing page (folio 9v), its place indicated by corresponding X marks. Following this, on the same page, is a section that was much revised—words were erased, struck out, and inserted—before being crossed out. It narrates Grundtvig's intervention but is not so dramatically framed as the version that survived in the text. At the bottom of 10r, Borges makes explicit reference to a main source for the essay: "John Earle (*The Deeds of Beowulf*; 1892)."

9. Unlike the rest of the text, the closing "cipio de una vaga inquietud—" ("beginning of a vague disquiet") runs directly onto the verso of this leaf.

10. Above this note is written "Vino Thorkelin a I[nglaterra] en 1786 [unclear]" ("Thorkelin arrived in England in 1786").

Thorkelin and *Beowulf*

THE PASSIONS BETWEEN MEN AND BOOKS INvite meditation, and *Don Quijote* is not the solitary example. Alexander the Great never slept without stashing his dagger and his *Iliad* under his pillow; the Byzantine Greeks composed lives of Christ out of the verses and hemistiches of Homer; Muslims believe that the Koran is an attribute of God, anterior to the Arabic in which it was written and anterior to Creation; and Dorian Gray, according to Oscar Wilde, was poisoned by a book, as others were by a fan or by a torch.[1] And what to say of the Kabbalists, who find mysteries hidden in the disposition and the number of letters in Scripture? Less well known than the cases of literary passion that I have enumerated here, but perhaps no less pathetic, is the case of Thorkelin, the Danish antiquary of the eighteenth century.[2]

In the 1780s he came across, in a catalog of Anglo-Saxon manuscripts, a reference to a poem whose subject was the wars of the Danes.[a] This discovery transformed his destiny. Thanks to the work of Macpherson's *Ossian*,[3] all of Europe turned its eyes to the past; Denmark reread and glossed Saxo Grammaticus with devotion.[4] Thorkelin, in 1786, went to England and returned with the three thousand lines of *Beowulf* transcribed in his own hand. A fire had mutilated the edges of the original text, which dated to the tenth century. Thorkelin devoted twenty years of his life to interpreting his transcribed copy, translating it into Latin prose and preparing it for publication. The difficulties that opposed his work were nearly infinite. Suffice it to mention the many textual lacunae of the original text, its irregular orthography, its arbitrary and infrequent punctuation, the lowercase proper nouns, the lack of hyphens, the interpolation of spaces in the writing of a single word or their omission between different ones. Even the lines that had brought him to England were, we know now, erroneous; *Beowulf* is the story of a prince who brings death to a demon of the marshes—a lineal descendant of the first murderer, Cain—and to a spotted dragon that guards a treasure. Anglo-Saxon prose was accessible to the philologists of the eighteenth century, but not so the verse, with its peculiar vocabulary and peculiar mechanics.

Anglo-Saxon poetry consists of lines of indeterminate syllabic length, and it ignores rhyme as well as assonance. Alliteration was an essential element; in each line there were, generally, three words that began with the same letter, two in the first half, one in the second. Genzmer holds that alliteration is more organic and effective than rhyme, since it infuses the entire line and not only the end.[5] The fact is that in English, alliteration—even heavy alliteration—can coexist with rhyme. Let Coleridge's famous stanza prove it:

> The fair breeze blew, the white foam flew,
> The furrow followed free;
> We were the first that ever burst
> Into that silent sea.
> [*The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* 2.25]

Anglo-Saxon had died, along with those who spoke it, but the music of its alliterative verse reawoke centuries later (as if it had lingered in the air) in the mystical *Piers Plowman* of Langland:

> "Is this Jhesus the jester" quoth I "that Jewes
> did to death,
> Or is it Piers the Plowman? Who paynted
> him so rede?" [C-Text 21.10–11][b]

The mystical difficulties of the poem (which is recorded as if it were prose in the manuscript, without division between lines) were compounded by a vocabulary abounding in those periphrases that the North called *kenningar* [kennings].[6] So the sea becomes the sail-road, the swan-road, the wave-cup, the whale-road; the sun is the world-candle, the sky-joy, the sky-gem; the harp is the joy-wood; the sword is hammer-remnants, the battle-friend, the battle-light; battle is the sword-game, the iron-storm; the ship is the sea-plow; the dragon is the dusk-threat, the treasure-guard; the body is the bone-house; the king is the rings-lord, the gold-friend of men, the men-shepherd, the ring-giver. . . . In a remote and barely recoverable language, such locutions had to have been enigmatic for a century whose poetic taste had been formed in the pages of Voltaire and Johnson.

Thorkelin thought that the work that he was translating was itself a translation of a lost Danish work; maybe this leap of faith was required to sustain his long enthusiasm. He guessed that the translator was Alfred the Great, who had translated into Anglo-Saxon the works of Orosius, Boethius, St. Gregory the Great, and Bede. He also believed that the author was contemporaneous with the protagonist, Beowulf, and could be no other than Bous, that son of Odin whose valorous death and whose tomb are described by Saxo Grammaticus. This identification would date it to the fourth century; Germanic scholars, now, opt for an Anglo-Saxon author and for the early decades of the eighth century.

The Danish Thorkelin wanted the poem whose resurrection and unveiling would justify his life to be Danish; perhaps this helps explain the inexplicable fact that he did not pursue the study of the Anglo-Saxon dialect and preferred to divine it out of cognate languages. With a laborious love he had plunged himself into the world of the poem, or into what he supposed was that world. He was nearing the end of his long labor, his manuscript almost ready for the printer, when catastrophe struck.

Embodied in violent men, in men closer to Beowulf than to the editor of *Beowulf*, the patriotic passion that brought Thorkelin to England and imposed on him the destiny of deciphering a difficult manuscript suddenly turned against him and annihilated his work. In 1807 the English fleet bombarded Copenhagen. The University went up in flames, as did a good part of the city, as well as Thorkelin's library. He was barely able to save his early transcription of the text.

Thorkelin, by himself, would not have overcome the setback, but a generous friend, Juan Bülow, encouraged him to start again, in his old age, the task that he had under-

taken in his youth.[7] In 1815 the first edition of *Beowulf* appeared, under the curious title *Exploits of the Danes in the Third and Fourth Century*. The applause was unanimous. Thorkelin thought that he had finally caught a taste of glory, but one afternoon a periodical called *The Sketch Album* found its way into his hands, much as the catalog had before it.[8] With a curiosity that quickly turned into indignation, and later despair, he read the first of a series of articles dedicated to his work.[9] Signing them was a young Evangelical minister, [N. F. S.] Grundtvig, who had fervently studied Thorkelin's published text with a sinister clairvoyance. Grundtvig proposed emendations that examination of the original would confirm, discovered unsuspected characters and episodes, and refuted Thorkelin's prologue, transcript, indices, and notes with irrefutable arguments. Posterity has confirmed a verdict that does not concede any value to Thorkelin's work other than as a literary curiosity. . . . Bülow, to make matters worse, sided with Grundtvig.

Such is the singular story of Thorkelin and his ill-fated passion. Death took his body in 1829, but we are free to imagine a continuation on a different plane. Thorkelin, in a Christian heaven, talking with the poet of *Beowulf*; Thorkelin in a Platonic heaven, gazing at the eternal archetype of *Beowulf*. . . . We're free also to think in a Pythagorean way, that Thorkelin inhabited other bodies and that today, in some bookstore in Buenos Aires, he turns the pages of this chanced-upon book, sees the unfamiliar word *Beowulf* and feels, just barely, the beginning of some vague disquiet. . . .

Author's Notes

a. The first line of *Beowulf* speaks of the "Spear-Danes."

b. Bertha Phillpotts observes that alliteration corresponds to the English habit of accenting initial syllables.[10]

Translator's Notes

1. Pope Clement VII was popularly believed to have been killed by the smoke of a poisoned torch carried before him in a procession. Clement's niece, Catherine de' Medici, was suspected of using poisonous fans and other objects to kill off courtly rivals. The speaker of Robert Browning's "The Laboratory" fantasizes about poisonous implements, among them a "fan-mount" (lines 19–20).

2. Thorkelin was a native of Iceland, then under Danish rule, and moved to Copenhagen in 1770. According to Fjalldal, he thought of himself as a Dane and would happily have been mistaken for one (323–24).

3. As a teenager the Scotsman James Macpherson invented the Gaelic poet Ossian and published supposedly medieval poetry out of forged manuscripts—fragments in 1760 and the epic *Fingal* in 1762—under that name.

4. Saxo Grammaticus (ca. 1160–1208) wrote the Latin *Gesta Danorum* (*The History of the Danes*).

5. Felix Genzmer (1878–1959) was the German translator of *Beowulf*, the Finnsburh fragment, and the *Edda* of the Codex Regis. Borges cites this same remark on alliteration in "Noticia de los kenningar" ("Report on *Kenningar* [kennings]").

6. By "the North," Borges means Old Norse–speaking peoples of medieval Scandinavia, Iceland, and the British Isles.

7. Johan von Bülow (1751–1828) was Thorkelin's aristocratic patron. Borges opted to render "John Bülow" (Earle's anglicization of the name) as "Juan" rather than to dig up the Danish "Johan" (Earle vi).

8. In Borges's essay, the Danish periodical *Nyeste Skilderie af Kjøbenhaven* is referred to as *El álbum de croquis* ("The Sketchbook"); Earle calls it "Copenhagen Sketch Book" (xii).

9. Grundtvig's criticism of Thorkelin's edition (*Nyeste Skilderie*, nos. 60, 63–68, 1815) is partially reprinted in English translation in Shippey and Haarder (108–13).

10. Borges cites Bertha Phillpotts's Edda *and Saga* (1931) as further reading in *Antiguas literaturas germánicas* (173) and *Literaturas germánicas medievales* (138).

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